

I CLAIM AS MY INVENTION:

1. A method for franking postal matter in a franking apparatus and for inspecting the franking, comprising the steps of:

electronically storing postage fee units as electronic coins, and debiting said

electronic coins as said postage fee units are consumed;

individualizing said electronic coins for respective mail pieces;

applying a machine-readable date stamp on a mail piece including an

individualized electronic coin for that mail piece; and

inspecting the mail piece with said date stamp thereon and determining whether

said electronic coin has been multiply used.

2. A method as claimed in claim 1 comprising, upon inspection of each mail piece, electronically storing the electric coin contained in the date stamp on the inspected mail piece, and inspecting subsequent mail pieces by comparing the electronic coin in the date stamp thereon to the stored electronic coins.

3. A method as claimed in claim 1 comprising associating an expiration date with each electronic coin.

4. A method as claimed in claim 3 comprising storing said electronic coins only up to expiration of the expiration date respectively associated therewith.

6. A method as claimed in claim 1 comprising combining a plurality of said electronic coins for franking said postal item.

7. A method as claimed in claim 1 comprising dividing said postage fee units respectively represented by said electronic coins into a plurality of sub-units, and franking different postal items with the respective sub-units.

8. A method as claimed in claim 1 comprising generating said postage fee units at a postage fee apparatus authorized by a postal service, using a secret key available only in said postage fee apparatus.

9. A method as claimed in claim 1 comprising additionally including at least one of a production date of said date stamp, a production time of said date stamp, a franked postage fee, and an address fee in non-manipulable form in said date stamp.

10. A method as claimed in claim 1 comprising additionally including postal matter data in said date stamp characterizing a physical property of a mail piece on which said date stamp is stamped.

11. A method as claimed in claim 10 wherein said postal matter data identify a type of packaging material of said mail piece.

12. A method as claimed in claim 10 wherein said postal matter data identify a surface structure of packaging material of said mail piece.

13. A method as claimed in claim 10 comprising adhering a label to said mail piece, said label containing label data forming said postal matter data.

14. A method as claimed in claim 1 comprising generating said postage fee units all of equal value with a postage fee generating apparatus.

15. A system for franking postal matter with a franking apparatus and for inspecting the franking comprising:

a franking apparatus for franking postal matter, having a printing unit for applying a machine-readable date stamp onto postal matter, a central unit containing a fee module for loading, storing and debiting postage fees to be included in said date stamp, and having a print control module for controlling said printing unit;

a postage fee apparatus for making postage fee units electronically available, said postage fee units being entered into said fee module of said central unit and being incorporated in said date stamp by said printing unit, said central unit including data in the date stamp in each item of postal matter which individualizes the date stamp compared to other date stamps; and an inspection unit for inspecting the date stamp to determine, from said data, whether said date stamp has been multiply used.

16. A system as claimed in claim 15 wherein said apparatus includes a cryptographic module for encrypting said data included in said date stamp, and wherein said inspection unit decrypts said data for determining whether said date stamp has been multiply used.

17. A system as claimed in claim 15 wherein said postage fee apparatus makes such postage fee unit available as respective electronic coins, with each electronic coin being individualized for inclusion in the date stamp for a respective item of postal matter, so that said electronic coins differ from each other when printed in said date stamp.

18. A system as claimed in claim 17 wherein said postage fee apparatus encrypts said postage fee units.

19. A system as claimed in claim 15 wherein said inspection unit includes a memory for storing respective date stamps on successively inspected items of postal matter, and wherein said inspection unit compares the date stamp on a currently inspected item of postal matter with said stored date stamps to determine whether the date stamp on the currently inspected item of postal matter has been previously used.

20. A franking apparatus for franking postal matter comprising:
a printing unit for applying a machine-readable date stamp containing an electronic coin onto an item of postal matter; and

a central unit connected to said printing unit, containing a fee module for loading, storing and debiting postage fees to be included in said date stamp and having a print control module for controlling said printing unit, said printing unit obtaining data from said fee module for inclusion in said date stamp which uniquely identifies said date stamp from any other date stamp on other items of postal matter so that multiple use of the individual date stamp is precluded.

21. A franking apparatus as claimed in claim 20 comprising a conventional computer and a conventional printer forming said printing unit.